

BELLINI *Norma* • Antonio Votto, cond; Maria Callas (*Norma*); Gabriella Carturan (*Clotilde*); Giulietta Simionato (*Adalgisa*); Franco Corelli (*Pollione*); Piero de Palma (*Flavio*); Nicolò Zaccaria (*Oroveso*); La Scala Ch & O • IMMORTAL PERFORMANCES 1214-2 mono (2 CDs: 157:40)

By Ken Meltzer
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A new Heritage Edition release from Immortal Performances (IP) addresses a void in the discography of Vincenzo Bellini's bel canto masterpiece, *Norma*. According to Gilberto Starone's *Chronology of Operas and Concerts*, an appendix to Marina Boagno's *Corelli: A Man, A Voice* (trans. Teresa Brentegani and Samuel Chase, Baskerville Publishers, Inc., Dallas, TX, 1996), Maria Callas and Franco Corelli sang together in three productions of *Norma* during the 1950s. The first was April 9-18, 1953, at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome. On November 19-29 of that year, Callas and Corelli sang *Norma* at the Teatro Verdi in Trieste. Excerpts from the November 19 performance have been issued on various labels. On January 2, 1958, the artists returned to Rome's Teatro dell'Opera. But the performance, infamously known as the "Rome Walkout," was canceled after Act I, due to Callas's indisposition. In 1960, Callas and Corelli made an EMI studio recording of *Norma*. While Corelli remains in prime voice, Callas's forays into the upper register are precarious, even while the soprano's interpretive genius remains intact. IP's Richard Caniell longed for a *Norma* recording that spotlighted both Callas and Corelli in their prime. Caniell thought about creating a synthesis of Callas's 1954 and 1960 EMI complete studio recordings, but could not achieve a convincing match of sonics.

Caniell then turned to a recording of the opening night of La Scala's 1955 season. The December 7 performance of *Norma* stars Callas in the title role, Giulietta Simionato as Adalgisa, Mario del Monaco as Pollione, and Nicola Zaccaria as Oroveso. Antonio Votto conducts. Many, including *Fanfare*'s Henry Fogel, consider the December 7, 1955 *Norma* to be the pinnacle of Callas's recordings of this signature role. As Henry wrote in a Hall of Fame Review (Sept/Oct 2016, 40:1) of Pristine Audio's (PA) restoration: "Because it is a fully staged performance in a great opera house, it seems to me that it reaches levels of intensity and sheer dramatic power not present on the (June 29, 1955) RAI (broadcast), even with the presence of Serafin. Votto, often a routinier, seems to be lifted way above that level by the greatness of what was happening on stage that night. The three principals feed off of each other, and if there is a single *Norma* of Callas to have, it is probably this one."

Giulietta Simionato is a marvelous Adalgisa; in superb, youthful voice, and dramatically intense. Likewise, Mario del Monaco is a splendid Pollione. Also in prime voice, del Monaco's powerful and intensely focused production, authority in the lower register, and noble declamation evoke strengths associated with the very first Pollione, Domenico Donzelli (1790-1873). In his Recording Notes, Richard Caniell is clear about his admiration for del Monaco: "when I heard Del Monaco, he *was* Pollione – I wanted nothing more. But then, when I heard Corelli, he *was* Pollione. But as there were two great Callas performances with Del Monaco (i.e.; the June 29, 1955 RAI broadcast and December 7, 1955 La Scala staged performance), I wondered, could I add to these an alternate performance with Corelli?" Using the December 7, 1955 La Scala broadcast as the foundation, Caniell substituted Corelli from the 1960 EMI recording for del Monaco's singing in the original performance. Because Callas's middle voice remains in fine estate in the 1960 EMI recording, Caniell is also able to use a considerable

portion of it for the moments when Callas and Corelli sing together. To my ears, Corelli's voice is more sensuously beautiful than del Monaco's. Corelli also pursues a broader palette of dynamics and colors, giving his phrasing a greater depth of flexibility. In his Act I aria, "Meco all'altar", Corelli delivers a blazing high C that del Monaco avoids. I offer these comparisons not to suggest one tenor outdoes the other. What we would give today to hear either del Monaco or Corelli in this role! As del Monaco's Pollione leaves the stage, so does the Flavio, Giuseppe Zampieri, who would soon have his own important career in dramatic tenor roles. Zampieri's unusually imposing Flavio is replaced by the superb comprimario lyric tenor, Piero de Palma.

The question then remains: how convincing is IP's fusion of the December 7 broadcast and the 1960 EMI recording? The answer is: remarkably so. As it turns out, the tempo choices in the two source recordings are strikingly similar, allowing the synthesis to emerge as a seamless entity. This is particularly impressive in the Act I Pollione – Adalgisa duet, where the exchanges between the characters are frequent, and sometimes rapid-fire. Richard Caniell has achieved a masterful consistency of sound, so that Corelli's participation in the 1955 La Scala broadcast is as persuasive as it is welcome. If you are seeking what Richard Caniell sought – a document of what Callas and Corelli might have sounded like in a mid-1950s *Norma* – this IP release will amply fulfill your wishes. IP's booklet complements its production with commentary (not available at the time of this review) by Dewey Faulkner, a detailed plot synopsis, a wealth of historic photos, Caniell's Recording Notes, and artist bios and photos. I am not about to relinquish the original December 7, 1955 La Scala *Norma*. And in his Hall of Fame Review, Henry Fogel cites the PA restoration as the one to own. But IP's Heritage Edition Callas/Corelli *Norma* is an impressive achievement. Recommended for those seeking what IP so convincingly provides.

Five stars: A *Norma* with Callas and Corelli in their prime, courtesy of Immortal Performances' Heritage Edition